

THE ART OF MAKING POETRY.

[BY AN EMERITUS PROFESSOR.]

I'll rhyme you so eight years together, dinners, suppers, and sleeping hours excepted—it is the right butter women rate to market.—*As You Like it.*

Cardinal Richelieu is reported to have said once that he would make so many dukes that it should be a shame to be one, and a shame not to be one. It appears, however, that he changed his mind afterwards, inasmuch as down to St. Simon's time there were only twelve or thirteen dukes in France, besides the blood-royal. At present they are more plenty, though it is even yet some distinction to be a duke, out of Italy; and in Poland there is an express law against the title being borne by any man who has not a clear income of three hundred dollars a year to support its dignity. In Bavaria, you may be made a baron for 7000 rix-dollars (or \$5250)—or a count for 30,000 rix-dollars, but in this last case you must not follow any trade or profession; bankers, accordingly, content themselves with baronies usually, like sensible men, preferring substance to sound; as in fact, when it is perfectly well-known you are able to buy a dozen counts and their titles, the world gives you credit as for the possession,—perhaps more. But what Cardinal Richelieu threatened with regard to dukedoms has, in fact, been effected by the progress of the world with regard to another title as honorable, perhaps, as that of duke, though few of its possessors could retain it if the Polish regulation mentioned above were to be applied to it and enforced. I mean the title of poet. 'To be a poet, or rather, for there is still some reverence left for that name, to be a versifier, is in these days a shame, and not to be one is a shame. That is, it is a shame for any man to take airs or pique himself on a talent now so common; so much reduced to rule and grown absolutely mechanical, and to be learned like arithmetic: and, on the other hand, for these same reasons, it is a shame not in some degree to possess it, or have it for occasions at command. It is convenient sometimes to turn some trifle from a foreign language, to hit off a scrap for a corner of a newspaper, to write a squib or an epigram, or play a game at crambo, and for all these emergencies the practised versifier is prepared. He has, very likely, the frames of a few verses always ready in his mind, constructed for the purpose, into which he can put any given idea at a moment's warning, with as much certainty as he could put a squirrel or a bird into a cage he had ready for it. These frames may consist merely of the rhymes, or *bouts rimés*, being common-place words such as would be easily lugged in apropos to anything; or they may be very common-place verses ready made, upon which an appropriate travestie could easily be superinduced; or, finally, their place may be supplied by the actual verses of some

author, who should, however, be, if possible, but little known, which may be travestied impromptu. This will be better understood by an instance, and as I am now making no secret of the matter, I will take those well-known lines of Moore.

“Vain was that man—and false as vain,
Who said, were he ordained to run
His long career of life again
He would do all that he had done.
It is not thus the voice that dwells
In coming birth-days, speaks to me;
Far otherwise, of time it tells,
Wasted unwisely—carelessly.”

Now suppose I wish to make love in poetry. I am a despairing lover—or will suppose myself one for the present, and my griefs may be poured out in this same measure, and with so many of these same words as to leave no ground for any claim to authorship for me in the following stanza.

Vain are the hopes, ah! false as vain,
That tempt me weary thus to run
My long career of love again,
And only do what I have done.
Ah! not of hope the light that dwells
In yonder glances, speaks to me,
Of an obdurate heart it tells,
Trifling with hearts all carelessly.

And now take the same stanza, only change the circumstance to something as different as possible. I am a flaming patriot, the enemy is at our gates, and I am to excite my fellow-citizens to arms. It will go to the self same tune and words.

Our country calls, and not in vain,
Her children are prepared to run
Their father's high career again,
And may we do as they have done.
In every trumpet voice there dwells
An echo of their fame for me;
Oh, who can hear the tale it tells,
And pause supinely—carelessly.

Again, which is a more possible case in our country, I am disgusted with an unprincipled mob orator, some indescribably low, but gifted scion of perdition, one whom no prose can reach; why have at him with the same arms,—they are always ready.

Thou bad vain man, thou false as vain,
If Satan were ordained to run
A free career on earth again,
He would do all that thou hast done.
It is of him the voice that dwells
In thy gay rhetoric speaks to me,
Of horrors scoffingly it tells,
Of crime and suffering carelessly.

Or, lastly,—for one may get too much of this—I am enraged with a bad singer or musician, and want to gibbet him,—lo, is not Tom Moore my executioner.

I stop my ears, but all in vain,
In vain to distant corners run,
He imitates the owls again,
And will do all that they have done.
Of roasting cats the voice that dwells
In such discordance, speaks to me,
Of Tophet up in arms it tells,
With doors left open carelessly.

There is absolutely no end to this, and any man may practice it to any extent, who has musical ear enough to dance a contre-danse in correct time, or march decently after a drum. He must not take his implements or frames out of Moore, he would do better to tax his own ingenuity for the making of them ; or, if he have none, he can do very well without it, if he only possess a little memory, and a competent knowledge of the dictionary. The examples given above are intended to prove that the words and the ideas have but little to do with each other, and that anything can be made out of anything else, and that, therefore, in compositions of this kind, it is perfectly legitimate procedure to cook your dolphin before you catch him. Make your verses, and look about you afterwards for ideas,—any man who has two, and there are many such in society, will give you one. But I must exhibit the whole process, for, after all, there is nothing like example ; and with the assurance, gentle reader, that up to this moment I have no more notion than you have of what they are to be, I shall proceed now to make eight lines of verse, and endeavour to make you understand, as I go along, how I do it. And, as I have shown already how the ideas may be inserted or changed in ready-made verses, I propose now to show how the verse may be worked up when the idea is ready ; and, to begin at the very beginning, I will shew also how I got the idea. This very evening—I am now writing at midnight—a highly-gifted and beautiful lady has been telling me of some conversation or circumstance, in the course of which she was compared to the full moon,—a comparison upon which the comment arose of itself most naturally to my lips—that, not to criticise it further, the lady had at least the advantage in her expression,—for which the moon is not remarkable. Very well, we will try to versify this, and we will succeed too, after some sort of a fashion, and that by virtue of intelligible rules.

The subject is a lady's face and a question of resemblance—*face* is a good word for a rhyme, and *trace* comes in very well with it, and has also some sort of bearing on the matter in hand ; the moon is to play a part, there is *light*, and *night* to rhyme with it ; *sky* also and

eye, for the deuce must be in it if we cannot get these words in ; *fair*, also, is very appropriate, and for a rhyme the word *there*, which has an impressive, pointed sound, and is a capital word to rest on at the end of a line or phrase. Now, let us try ; I should like some one to stand by with a watch, and we would fill up this against time. It is evident, that the difficulty of this is nothing to a game at *bouts rimés*, for there the words are expressly chosen for their difficulty and incongruity, things as hard as possible for any sense to link together,—here, they are so easy that, for fault of better, nonsense might do it.—Allons.—

Oh, lady—would some spirit trace
Upon the moon's unmeaning face

That goes of itself,—if we had shaken a dictionary over the paper the words would have fallen into their places,—but the *eye* must come next, as we are to tell what the effect would be, and after *eye*, *sky* is indispensable ; *night* and *light* must follow, as next in order of thought ; and *fair* and *there*, which, for the reason given above, must come in at the end. But we must begin anew, for I have not confidence enough in the effect my instructions have yet produced, to trust my readers even to put together the *disjecta membra poetæ*.

Oh, lady, would some spirit trace
Upon the moon's unmeaning face,
Such lineaments as thine ; mine eye
Should grow a gazer of the sky,
And often, in the cloudless night,
Should turn to her ethereal light,
To hail its beams, so bland and fair,
And greet thy rich expression there.

Here is some scope for criticism,—as in the sixth line, the word *her* does not seem to have any strict antecedent ; it might, by the construction, apply either to the night or the sky, or possibly, though hardly, to the moon, as it is intended. It is easy to make this right and say,

Turn to yon orb's ethereal light, &c., &c.

As for Moore's lines to Lord Strangford,—but I have borrowed nothing from them,—or if I have, upon the principles of these days, it's all one.

I quit here, for a moment, the subject of rhyme, to say a word or two upon blank verse, that mortal humbug which "prose poets" are so fond of, and, certainly, the world would soon be full of it, if any body were fond of *them*. There is no more difficulty or skill in cutting up a given quantity of prose into blank verse, than there is in sawing up a log into planks, both operations certainly reflect credit

on their original inventors, and would immortalize them if we knew their names, but fame would have her hands full, and her mouth too, if she should occupy herself in these days with all the handicraftsmen in both or either. The best way, perhaps, of setting this in a clear point of view, is to exemplify it; and, for this purpose, it would not be difficult to pitch upon authors whose whole writings, or nearly so, would bear being written as blank verse, though they were given out as prose. For instance, there is John Bunyan, the whole of whose works it would be easier to set up into verse than to restore some works, now held to be such, to their metrical shape, if, by any accident, the ends of their lines should get confused. Let the reader try his skill in reconstructing, with the visible signs of poetry, the following extract from *Samson Agonistes*, from line 118, omitting the next three, and going on to line 130.

"See how he lies at random, carelessly diffused, * * * in slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds, o'er-worn and soiled, or do my eyes misrepresent; can this be he, that heroic, that renowned, irresistible Samson, whom, unarm'd, no strength of man or fiercest wild beast could withstand, who tore the lion as the lion tears the kid, ran on embattled armies clad in iron, and, weaponless himself, made arms ridiculous, &c."

But to return to Bunyan; take the following extract, which is verbatim, from his "*World to Come*,"—it is more correct metre than much that we find written as verse in the old dramatists, though it is always printed as prose.

"Now, said my guardian angel, you are on
The verge of hell, but do not fear the power
Of the destroyer;
For my commission from the imperial throne
Secures you from all dangers.
Here you may hear from devils and damned souls
The cursed causes of their endless ruin;
And what you have a mind to ask, inquire,
The devils cannot hurt you, though they would,
For they are bound
By him that has commissioned me, of which
Themselves are sensible, which makes them rage,
And fret, and roar, and bite their hated chains,
But all in vain."

And so on ad infinitum, or throughout the "*World to Come*."

But not to seek eccentric writers and far-fetched examples, let us take a popular and noted one, even Dr. Johnson himself,—every body will recognize the opening sentence of *Rasselas*.

"Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope, who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow, attend to the history of *Rasselas*, prince of Abyssinia."

This is prose incontrovertibly,—in two minutes it shall be as incontrovertibly blank verse.

Oh, ye, who listen with credulity
To fancy's whispers, or with eagerness
Phantoms of hope pursue, or who expect
Age will perform the promises of youth,
Or that the present day's deficiencies
Shall by the morrow be supplied, attend
To Rasselas, the Abyssinian Prince,
His history. Rasselas was fourth son, &c.

I do not suspect any reader of this Magazine of stupidity enough to find a difficulty here, or of wit enough to imagine one, the process speaks for itself, and so far requires no comment ; but in carrying it a step or two farther, we shall see by what alchemy gold may be transmuted into baser metals and into tinsel, and how the rogue who steals, or the poor devil who borrows it, may so thoroughly disguise it as to run no risk at last in passing it openly for his own. I take the first six lines only of the above, and tipping them with rhymes, they suffer a little violence, and read thus.

Oh, ye who listen,—a believing race—
To fancy's whispers, or with eager chase
Phantoms of hope pursue, expecting still
Age will the promises of youth fulfil,
Or that the morrow will indeed amend
The present day's deficiencies, attend—

Now in this shape they might do pretty well had they not been taken purposely from a notorious part of a notorious work, for one might borrow even from Rasselas, in the middle or any where less in sight, and few indeed are the critics who would detect and expose the cheat ; but the next stage of our progress would distance the major part even of these. That a scrap from Rasselas should be set to Yankee Doodle is an idea which seems to have been reserved from all time to be first broached in the present article. But if not the same, there are similar things done hourly, and if the written monuments of genius, like the temples and palaces of antiquity, were themselves diminished by all the materials they supply to new constructions, how much would there be remaining of them now. Imagine a chasm in Moore or Byron for every verse any lover has scrawled in an album, or any Cora or Matilda in a newspaper ; or reverse the case, and imagine the masters of the lyre and of the pen reclaiming, throughout the world, whatever is their own, in whatever hands and in whatever shape it might be now existing. The Scotch freebooter was warned upon his death-bed, rather late, but it was the first time the parson had had a chance at him, that in another world all the people he had robbed, and all the valuables he had robbed them of, sheep, horses, and cattle, would rise up to bear witness against him. "Why then," said he, in a praiseworthy vein of restitution, "if the horses, and kye, and a' will be there, let

ilka shentleman tak her ain, and Donald will be an honest man again." Now I should like to be by, at a literary judgment, when "ilka shentleman should take her ain," to have righteousness rigidly laid to the line, and see who would in fact turn out to be "a shentleman" and have a balance left that was "her ain," and who would be a Donald, left with nothing, a destitute "bipes implumis." Then, and not till then, will I give back the following piece of morality to Rasselas, and indeed, in the shape into which I am now going to put it I think it will not be till then that he or anybody for him will lay claim to it.

Air, "Yankee Doodle."

Listen ye, who trust as true
All the dreams of fancy,
Who with eager chase pursue
Each vain hope you can see,
Who expect that age will pay,
All that youth may borrow,
And that all you want to-day
Will be supplied to-morrow.

I leave this matter here, having spun it out, perhaps, something too much, but if I have treated it frivolously, I am not the less, with regard to the subject, in profound and indignant earnest. We profane the lofty name of poet by such short-sighted, indiscriminate application—we allow reputations to be founded and to endure, on such unreal and dishonest bases, that it is high time that somebody should proclaim, and that all should realize the difference between a poet and a versifier, and that the last name should be indelibly branded upon those who either professedly or fraudulently reconstruct from the labors of others, for mere rhymes are as mechanically made as stone fences;—"Walls supply stones"—it is Rasselas again that I quote,—"*more easily than quarries, and palaces and temples will be demolished to make stables of granite and cottages of porphyry.*" The first care of criticism is to see what an author's material is, gold, silver, or ivory,—wood, hay, or stubble; the next is to know, if it be valuable, where he got it; if it be not, or not original, and if he has managed, notwithstanding, to make it ornamental, why we need not be very severe or difficult about giving him as much credit as we would attribute to a basket-maker or a carver of figure-heads and claw-feet, but we should mark him out his place, and keep him in it. But after all, there is nothing new under the sun, and reproduction of old ideas will pass for new, songs will be made unsuspected out of sermons, and sermons out of songs, and metamorphosis will be mistaken to the end of the chapter for creation. "*Isto enim modo,*" says old George Buchanan, apropos to a question of etymology, and the remark applies most forcibly to the subject we are discussing,—*Isto enim modo quidlibet e quolibet licebit effingere.*